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Title	Khrushchev Era Politics and the Investigation of the Kirov Murder, 1956-1957
Author(s)	Lenoe, Matthew
Citation	Acta Slavica Iaponica, 24, 47-73
Issue Date	2007
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/39515
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	ASI24_003.pdf



Khrushchev Era Politics and the Investigation of the Kirov Murder, 1956-1957

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The assassination of Sergei Kirov, Leningrad party chief, on December 1, 1934, was a political sensation inside and outside the USSR. Although the killer, a disgruntled Communist named Leonid Nikolaev, insisted in early interrogations that he had acted alone, Soviet police could not accept this. In a Soviet culture where even rotten vegetables on store shelves could signal counter-revolutionary sabotage, investigators interpreted the murder as a conspiracy by hostile capitalist powers, internal “class enemies,” or both. Under Stalin’s direction, senior officers of the security police (NKVD/UGB) pinned the blame for the assassination on Stalin’s former rivals in the Communist Party leadership, the so-called “Left” and “Right” oppositionists. Within four weeks of the killing, a Soviet military tribunal sentenced to death Nikolaev and thirteen alleged co-conspirators, almost all of them former members of the so-called “Zinovievite Opposition” in Leningrad. Then in January 1935 Soviet courts convicted Grigorii Zinoviev and one-time ally Lev Kamenev of “moral complicity” in Kirov’s murder, supposedly because they had fostered oppositionist moods within the party. These trials, of the so-called “Leningrad Center” and “Moscow Center” respectively, began a brutal purge of the party leadership.¹

In the four years that followed, Stalin and his security men used torture, blackmail, and threats to develop “evidence” against nearly all of Stalin’s past opponents among the party leaders. Charges of conspiracy to kill Kirov and other Soviet leaders were central to the show trials and “Great Terror” of 1936-1939, in which Stalin executed or incarcerated much of the “Old Bolshevik” leadership and reinforced his own supreme power. In the end, Stalin’s use

1 See Alla Kirilina, *Neizvestnyi Kirov* (Moscow: OLMA-PRESS, 2001). Kirilina is the world’s foremost expert on the Kirov assassination and my own account of the murder and its consequences owes a great deal to her. Kirilina’s publications between 1989 and 2000 make a consistent and strong case that the assassin Nikolaev was a lone gunman. Kirilina, apparently following the conclusions of Soviet investigators in 1967 and later, has argued that post-Stalin Soviet investigations of the assassinations were heavily influenced by political struggles. J. Arch Getty made the same argument earlier in *Origins of the Great Purges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 216-217.

* I would like to thank the Slavic Research Center of Hokkaido University for the Foreign Visiting Fellowship (2005-2006) that enabled me to complete this article. I would also like to thank Yale University Press and editor Jonathan Brent in particular for funding two research trips to Moscow.

of the murder led some observers to conclude that the dictator himself had ordered Kirov's killing.²

Many senior NKVD officers also lost their lives in the political intrigues that followed the Kirov murder. Stalin's suspicion of local Leningrad NKVD officers was strengthened by the death of Borisov, one of Kirov's bodyguards, in an apparent auto accident the day after the murder. Soon after this the central NKVD arrested Leningrad NKVD chief Filip Medved, his deputies Zaporozhets and Fomin, and other Leningrad officers on charges of negligence in guarding Kirov. When Stalin decided to arrest longtime NKVD chief Genrikh Iagoda for treason (spring 1937), the security services re-arrested Medved and the other Leningrad officers, tortured them to collect "evidence" against Iagoda, and ultimately executed most of them.

The Kirov murder did not lose its sensational or political qualities over time. In the 1950s and 1960s commentators in the West described the murder as the first act of the Terror, postulating that Stalin had arranged the killing as part of a grand plot to justify the extermination of party cadres. After Stalin's death, Soviet leaders also undertook to investigate the assassination in the larger context of the Terror. Between 1955 and 1967 the Presidium/Politburo of the party Central Committee created five different commissions to study the show trials of 1936-1938 and the annihilation of party cadres.³ Each re-examined the Kirov murder. But all of these investigations were driven primarily by the Communist Party's need to make sense of the Terror, and by the political agendas of party leaders (the latter point has been made most forcefully by Alla Kirilina).⁴ In the course of revision and revision of revision, the original facts of the Kirov case were almost hopelessly obscured by rumor-mongering, Soviet secrecy, and myth-making, both Communist and anti-Communist.

To understand the facts of the murder, and Stalin's use thereof, it is necessary to excavate the history of the various Soviet investigations. Apart from third- or fourth-hand rumors, all of the evidence that we have about Kirov's killing was filtered through these investigations. This article examines the history of the first full-scale investigation after Stalin's death, conducted in 1956-1957 following Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" to the Twentieth Party Congress.

2 For the case that Stalin ordered Kirov's murder, see Boris Nicolaevsky, *Power and the Soviet Elite* (New York: Praeger, 1965); Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror* (New York: Macmillan, 1968); idem, *Stalin and the Kirov Murder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Amy Knight, *Who Killed Kirov?* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999).

3 N. Petukhov and V. Khomchik, "Delo o 'Leningradskom tsentre'," *Vestnik verkhovnogo suda SSSR* 5 (1991), pp. 15-18; "Kratkaia spravka o rezul'tatakh vyiasneniia obstoiatel'stv ubiistva S.M. Kirova," Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (RGANI), f. 6 [Komitet partiinogo kontroliia], op. 13, d. 117, ll. 1-18.

4 See Alla Kirilina, *L'assassinat de Kirov: Destin d'un stalinien, 1888-1934* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), p. 223; and Getty, *Origins*, pp. 216-217.

THE POLITICS OF DE-STALINIZATION

The exposure during the Khrushchev years of Stalin's murderous abuse of power was due to political conflicts as much as to abstract ideals of truth and justice. Stalin's death opened a desperate succession struggle between his collaborators in the party leadership. Continuing practices established by Stalin himself, Lavrentii Beria, Nikita Khrushchev, Georgii Malenkov and their respective allies scrambled to find or fabricate compromising information on one another and to pose as reformers. Compromising one another was not difficult, as all of the rivals were directly implicated in the mass violence wrought by the Stalinist regime. Khrushchev, the victor in the succession battles, proved the master of mobilizing archival documents and party memory against his competitors, but Beria, the first loser, employed the same tactics. It was Beria who, just days after the dictator's death, began the process of reexamining Stalin-era legal cases and "rehabilitating" some of those convicted. Simultaneously, he accumulated in his safe materials incriminating other party leaders. After the other Central Committee Presidium members arrested Beria on June 26, 1953, they portrayed him as the mastermind of state terror and a foreign spy. In the next four years Khrushchev took the mantle of white knight, defeating his rivals Malenkov, Viacheslav Molotov, and Lazar Kaganovich in part by using the KGB to expose their participation in Stalin's terror. Thus, ironically, the conflict between Stalin's henchmen led step-by-step toward exposure of the atrocities they and their dead leader had committed.⁵

The rehabilitation of "repressed" persons was a complex struggle in which political power and the creation of a coherent party history of the Stalin years were tightly bound together. It was confined to party and professional elites, with the *narod*, "the common people," excluded. Participants had sundry motivations. Party leaders and apparatchiks had an interest in changing the Stalin-era rules of political struggle, in which the penalty for defeat was often arrest or death. Communist survivors of prisons and labor camps sought to drive a stake through the heart of Stalinism. Stalin's closest deputies in the late 1930s, Molotov, Malenkov, and Kaganovich, sought to evade responsibility for the Terror. Khrushchev aimed to secure his own position as party leader by exposing them. Other players, mainly associated with Khrushchev, worked to create a useable, heroic party history that would nonetheless acknowledge Stalinist terror. This history would legitimate the rule of a reformed Communist Party. Yet others, such as Dmitrii Shepilov in June 1957 and Mikhail Su-

5 V. Naumov and Iu. Sigachev, eds., *Lavrentii Beria, 1953. Stenogramma iul'skogo plenuma TsK KPSS i drugie dokumenty* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond "Demokratiia," 1999), *passim*; N. Kovaleva, A. Korotkov et al, eds., *Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich, 1957. Stenogramma iun'skogo plenuma TsK KPSS i drugie dokumenty* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond "Demokratiia," 1998), pp. 419-421 (Rudenko's discussion of Beria's incriminating files on other leaders, and Malenkov's efforts to control access to same following Beria's arrest).

slov in June 1956, wished to put the brakes on public reevaluation of the Stalin years because they believed such discussion undermined the foundations of Communist rule. At the same time they did not advocate a return to full-blown Stalinist repression.

Feuds, friendships, and factional resentments going all the way back to the days of the revolution shaped the battle over de-Stalinization. Anastas Mikoian quietly encouraged surviving comrades from the Bolshevik revolution in Baku to research and publicize the Great Terror. Veterans of the Leningrad Party leadership who survived Stalin's purge of the city organization in the notorious "Leningrad Affair" of 1949-1950 proved eager to attack Malenkov for his role in organizing those repressions. Ivan Serov, who ran the KGB from 1954-1958, and Roman Rudenko, chief prosecutor for the USSR, had connections with Khrushchev dating back to the latter's years as head of the Ukrainian party organization from 1939-1941. There are many more examples.

Thus, the usual distinctions between reformers and Stalinists, or "liberals" and "conservatives," which still tend to dominate discussion of the Khrushchev years, do not capture the complexity of the political battles around "rehabilitation" and acknowledgment of the Terror. The history of the Khrushchev-era commissions that reexamined Sergei Kirov's assassination, and ultimately tried to create a new narrative of Soviet history, must be understood in this context – of desperate struggles for power and an equally desperate desire to escape from the Stalinist nightmare and return to the revolutionary dreams of 1917.

THE INVESTIGATORS

Within one year of Stalin's death, Nikita Khrushchev emerged as the most powerful man inside the "collective leadership" of the party.⁶ In the early expansion of his political network, Khrushchev secured two appointments with great consequences for de-Stalinization – Roman A. Rudenko as Chief Prosecutor of the USSR (July 1953), and Ivan A. Serov as head of the KGB (March 1954).⁷

Rudenko was a Khrushchev client. As first secretary of the Ukrainian Republic Central Committee, Khrushchev promoted him in 1942 from chief prosecutor of Lugansk province to assistant prosecutor of the republic. Rudenko served in the post from 1942-1944 and then as Chief Prosecutor of Ukraine from 1944-1953. In addition, he gained international fame as the chief Soviet prosecutor at the Nuremberg Nazi war crimes trial in 1945-1946. In his mem-

6 William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), pp. 240-241, 258, 264. Dmitrii Shepilov confirms the importance of Khrushchev's appointment as first secretary in September 1953 (Shepilov, *Nepriimknuvshii* [Moscow: "Vagrius," 2001], p. 294).

7 On the appointment of Rudenko, see Naumov and Sigachev, *Lavrentii Beriia*, pp. 216-217. On Serov's appointment, see Taubman, *Khrushchev*, p. 264.

oires, Khrushchev claims that he protected Rudenko against accusations made against him during the Great Terror, and implies that Rudenko was in debt to him.⁸

Ivan A. Serov also had longtime ties to Khrushchev. Serov began his career as an artillery officer but transferred into the NKVD in February 1939. As newly appointed commissar Beria purged the NKVD of officers associated with N.I. Yezhov (the second NKVD purge in two years), he promoted masses of new recruits from the party and the Red Army. Serov was one. In September 1939 Serov became NKVD chief for the Ukrainian Republic, where he worked closely with Khrushchev, and with General Georgii Zhukov. During this period Serov ran the “cleansing” of the occupied city of Lvov of “bourgeois and nationalist elements” (i.e. mass deportations) and participated in the mass execution of captured Polish officers in the Katyn forest in 1940. Soon after Serov’s transfer from the Ukrainian post in February 1941, Germany and her allies invaded the USSR. During the war, Serov, as one of the deputy chiefs of the NKVD, specialized in mass arrests and mass deportations from areas recaptured by the Red Army. He took part in the deportations of the Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingush, and Volga Germans, and the purges of suspected collaborators and “bourgeois nationalists” in Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania. As NKVD chief for the First Belorussian Front late in the war, he maintained close working relationships with both Khrushchev and Zhukov.⁹

Serov served at the center of Stalin’s state security apparatus, and he was deeply compromised. Not only had he taken part in mass repressions, but he was also implicated in lucrative illegal business dealings while stationed in occupied Lvov (1939-1941) and occupied Germany after World War II. Multiple observers have concluded that Serov was Khrushchev’s creature during the post-Stalin years precisely because his shady past made him vulnerable to pressure. Khrushchev’s rivals feared Serov both because he was a Khrushchev loyalist and because of his Stalinist history.¹⁰

Khrushchev’s own mentors had been Kaganovich and Stalin himself, and his political style after 1953 resembled Stalin’s in a number of ways.¹¹ These included his reliance on trusted cronies, his readiness to undermine stealthily and then abandon those same cronies (this was Serov’s fate), his use of compromised persons in key positions (i.e. Serov and Rudenko), his pretend modesty

8 On Rudenko’s biography, see N.S. Khrushchev, *Vospominaniia. Vremia. Liudi. Vlast’*, vol. 1 (Moskva: “Moskovskie novosti,” 1999), p. 144, n. 29, pp. 185-186, vol. 3, p. 572; Naumov and Sigachev, *Laurentii Beria*, p. 480.

9 N.V. Petrov, “Pervyi predsdatel’ KGB general Ivan Serov,” *Otechestvennaia istoriia* 5 (1997), pp. 23-42. Source found through Taubman, *Khrushchev*, p. 741, n. 48.

10 Ibid.; Shepilov, *Neprimknuvshii*, pp. 159, 269, 353-354; Taubman, *Khrushchev*, p. 370, and Anastas Mikoian, *Tak bylo – razmyshlenie o minuvshem* (Moskva: Vagrius, 1999), p. 607.

11 This observation is made by Shepilov (*Neprimknuvshii*, p. 397), Taubman (*Khrushchev*, p. 241), and Sergo Mikoian, Anastas Mikoian’s son (*Stalinism as I Saw It* [Washington D.C.: Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, 1991], p. 43).

covering a ravenous hunger for adulation, and his predilection for keeping those around him guessing by maintaining at least two different “lines” on a given issue. On the other hand, Khrushchev was more flamboyant than Stalin, more impulsive, and a lot less bloodthirsty.

One tactic that Khrushchev may have learned from Stalin was the recruitment of the repressed to agitate for the overthrow of the party officials who had repressed them. As early as 1953 Mikoian and Khrushchev sponsored the return of high-ranking Communists accused of “counterrevolutionary crimes” from exile, labor camps, and prison, and they used these returnees against their political rivals.¹² One early returnee from the camps who became crucial to the investigation of the Kirov murder was Olga Shatunovskaia. Born in 1901, Shatunovskaia was the child of a Jewish lawyer in Baku. She attended the same gymnasium with the children of Suren Shaumian, the leader of the Baku Bolsheviks. In 1917 Shatunovskaia threw herself into the Bolshevik revolutionary movement in Baku. In addition to her activities as a street activist, she served as Shaumian’s secretary and head of the Baku Council of People’s Commissars Press Department in the months after the October Revolution. When Turkish forces helped Mensheviks and Azerbaidjani nationalists overthrow Soviet rule in Baku in September 1918, Shatunovskaia was captured and by her own account nearly executed (the new regime did execute Suren Shaumian and 25 other leaders of the Baku Soviet, turning the “twenty-six commissars” into Bolshevik martyrs). Released, she joined the Bolshevik underground movement in the Caucasus, working closely with Anastas Mikoian, among others.¹³

In the following years Shatunovskaia started a family and established herself as an important party official, serving in Baku, Briansk, Siberia, and Moscow. She was acting chief of the Moscow Party Committee’s Department of Leading Party Organs when the NKVD arrested her in November 1938 on charges of Trotskyite activity. During her imprisonment Shatunovskaia sent several letters to Mikoian disputing the case against her and seeking his help. Some of these appeals reached Mikoian through her childhood friend Lev Shaumian, son of the Baku commissar. Mikoian simply ignored the bulk of them.¹⁴

When M.A. Bagirov, author of one of the denunciations that led to Shatunovskaia’s arrest, was himself arrested in March 1954 Shatunovskaia peti-

12 *Reabilitatsiia – kak eto bylo. Dokumenty Prezidiuma TsK KPSS i drugie materialy*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond “Demokratiia,” 2000-2004), pp. 116-117. One example was the camp survivor A.I. Snegov, who after release from the camps was a prosecution witness at Beria’s trial and later became a prominent advocate of de-Stalinization. See Taubman, *Khrushchev*, pp. 277-278, Khrushchev speech to Leningrad *aktiv* in *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 1, p. 133, and biographical material on Snegov in *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, p. 891.

13 See Olga Shatunovsky (*sic*), “Gone Century: Memoirs Edited by Jana Kutin and Andrei Broido,” www.caida.org/broido/ola/ola.html, rasskazy 1, 2; and biographical data on Shatunovskaia in *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, p. 904.

14 Shatunovsky, “Gone Century,” *passim*; *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, p. 904.

tioned Khrushchev for release from her sentence. Notified of her rehabilitation in May, Shatunovskaia made her way to Moscow, where, she later recalled, Khrushchev invited her for a private meeting. Khrushchev's assistants soon provided her with an apartment in the capital, a car, and a position as Chief Controller of the Party Control Commission. Khrushchev told her he wanted to accelerate rehabilitation. In the coming years Shatunovskaia became the most dedicated proponent inside the party apparatus of the theory that Stalin had organized Kirov's killing.¹⁵

Shatunovskaia's long history with Mikoian and his circle is a critical part of the story of the investigation into Kirov's assassination. As already noted, Shatunovskaia worked closely with Mikoian in the Baku underground and claimed in old age that he had been her suitor. She also had attended gymnasium with Lev Shaumian, whom Mikoian in effect adopted after the execution of his father.¹⁶ In 1954-1955 these three Baku Commune veterans laid the groundwork for Khrushchev's complete overturn of the official history of Stalin's rule at the Twentieth Party Congress.

Mikoian's memoirs present Lev Shaumian as instrumental in the early rehabilitation efforts of 1954-1955. Shaumian himself had never been repressed. But, while working in the party apparatus as an editor of newspapers and later the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, he did maintain contact with some in the camps. Following Stalin's death, many imprisoned Communists used Shaumian as an intermediary to petition Mikoian for review of their cases. Mikoian says that it was Shaumian who "brought to me" Shatunovskaia and repressed Communist A.I. Snegov, and that he (Mikoian) in turn brought them to Khrushchev's notice.¹⁷ Shatunovskaia and Snegov, Mikoian writes, "opened my eyes to a great deal, telling me of their arrests, the tortures used during the interrogation process, and the fate of dozens of our acquaintances..."¹⁸

Approximately half a year before the Twentieth Party Congress of February 1956, Mikoian claims that he asked Shaumian to do some quiet research into the fate of delegates to the Seventeenth Party Congress of 1934. Specifically, he wanted a list of the Central Committee members and candidate members elected at that Congress who were arrested or executed during the Terror. When Shaumian gave him the list about one month later, Mikoian claims that he was "shocked." He went to Khrushchev and persuaded the latter that they were going to have to tackle the issue of Stalinist repressions at the Twentieth Party Congress.¹⁹ It is worth noting that whatever general desire Mikoian and

15 Shatunovsky, "Gone Century," *rasskaz* 20; information on Bagirov case in *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 1, p. 407, n. 61.

16 Mikoian, *Tak bylo*, p. 90.

17 In their memoirs Khrushchev and Mikoian competed for the credit for initiating de-Stalinization. Therefore it is difficult to determine precisely who was first in touch with Snegov and Shatunovskaia.

18 Mikoian, *Tak bylo*, pp. 589-590.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 590-592.

Khrushchev felt to review Stalinist history and rehabilitate the dictator's victims, there was also a very concrete motivation for bringing the issue up at the forthcoming congress. At the July 1955 plenary meeting of the Central Committee, Khrushchev and Molotov clashed openly.²⁰ Mikoian's conversations with Shaumian would have come after that plenum, and one of the purposes of Shaumian's research was probably to gather material compromising Molotov.

Around the time that Mikoian asked Shaumian to research the fate of the 1934 Central Committee, he also requested that Shatunovskaia send him an official letter recounting a story she had told him related to the Kirov assassination. The letter was forthcoming. In it Shatunovskaia described conversations she had with one Dr. Kirchakov and a nurse, Dusia Trunina, while hospitalized at the Kolyma labor camp in 1943-1944. Kirchakov, she wrote, had heard directly from Filip Medved (head of the Leningrad NKVD at the time of Kirov's assassination), an eyewitness account of Stalin's interrogation of the assassin Nikolaev the day after Kirov was killed. While exiled to Kolyma in 1937 Medved supposedly told Kirchakov that when Stalin asked Nikolaev "Why did you kill Kirov?" Nikolaev accused officers of the Leningrad NKVD of providing him with the murder weapon and "persecuting" him until he agreed to assassinate Kirov. When Nikolaev said this, guards "beat (him) on the head with their (pistols), he collapsed, and they carried him out..."²¹

Shatunovskaia's tale was third-hand by her own account – Medved had supposedly told Kirchakov, who told her. The story also contains a number of obvious factual errors. For one, it places Zaporozhets in the interrogation room with Stalin, Medved, Nikolaev, Iagoda, and a number of other Leningrad NKVD officers. But multiple sources indicate that Zaporozhets was not in Leningrad at the time. At several points the story conflicts with the account of Mikhail Rosliakov, who was waiting at the time of interrogation in a room one floor below, in case Stalin wanted to interview him. For example, Rosliakov heard that Nikolaev had been carried into the interrogation "in a semi-conscious state" and initially failed to recognize Stalin. He supposedly cried and repeated the words "What have I done, what have I done!" He demonstrated only a "foggy" recollection of events.²²

Mikoian forwarded Shatunovskaia's letter to Khrushchev with a note on the envelope – "To Comrade N.S. Khrushchev – to be opened only by him."²³ Khrushchev evidently put the letter on the agenda of the Presidium of December 31, 1955. The only record of the meeting is a "working summary" of the discussion, which indicates that Politburo member Nikolai Bulganin read the letter out loud. While he was reading Kliment Voroshilov interrupted with a shout of "Lies!" Molotov noted that he was present when Stalin interviewed

20 Taubman, *Khrushchev*, pp. 266-269.

21 *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, p. 816, n. 5.

22 Mikhail Rosliakov, *Ubiistvo Kirova* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1991), pp. 45-46.

23 *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, p. 816, n. 5.

Nikolaev and “no one was hit.” Mikoian asserted that “Stalin was extremely upset. The Chekists had a hand in the whole thing.” Khrushchev agreed that “if you look at the business, it doesn’t smell right,” and proposed interviewing Dr. Kirchakov and the driver of the car in which Borisov died. Molotov, perhaps afraid of what charges might surface in oral interrogations, expressed skepticism that interviews would provide useful information, and suggested “checking the documents.” The Presidium resolved to look at the files of the 1930s cases against Iagoda, Yezhov, and Medved.²⁴

Khrushchev, with the help of Mikoian and his associates, was clearly preparing for a serious discussion of Stalinist repressions (at least against Communists after 1934) at the forthcoming party congress. Molotov, Kaganovich, Malenkov, Voroshilov, and other party leaders outside Khrushchev’s inner circle had to be nervous. Khrushchev, who controlled the KGB (Serov), and the USSR prosecutor’s office (Rudenko), and had key allies in the Army and the party’s Control Commission, had the upper hand. He was able to force a very uncomfortable discussion of the Stalinist years on his rivals on his own terms. At the same time, his power was not unlimited. He proceeded cautiously, using Mikoian’s people, whom he could always cast loose, to do the research, and forbearing to charge Molotov and the others directly with collaboration in the Terror. The discussion of Shatunovskaia’s letter was typical. Khrushchev and Mikoian suggested that something “didn’t smell right,” and that NKVD officers might have had something to do with Kirov’s murder. Shatunovskaia’s letter did imply that Stalin might have been involved, but Khrushchev and Mikoian did not go that far.

Khrushchev’s colleagues had much to fear, but they had to proceed carefully. They acceded to the proposal for an informal inquiry into the Kirov murder. At other Presidium meetings in the months before the Twentieth Party Congress Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, Bulganin, and Malenkov all voiced their support for revealing to the Party Congress some of Stalin’s unjustified persecutions of Communists. At the same time they called for doing so “with a cool head,” and for reaffirming Stalin’s great accomplishments in building socialism. In reply a chorus of junior Presidium members who supported Khrushchev (Aristov, Saburov, Suslov, Pervukhin, and others) insisted that the Presidium had to tell the congress “everything” (Suslov), that Stalin had no good points (Pervukhin), and that Stalinist repressions were not “faults” but “crimes” (Saburov). By early February 1956 everyone knew what the party line was – even Kaganovich was saying “we can’t deceive history... Khrushchev’s proposal for a report (on Stalinist repression) is correct.”²⁵

In the meantime, the Presidium appointed a commission consisting of junior Presidium members Peter Pospelov, P.T. Komarov, Averkii Aristov and

²⁴ *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 1, p. 296.

²⁵ See notes on Presidium sessions of Nov. 5, 1955, Feb. 1, 1956, and Feb. 9, 1956 in *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 1, pp. 275-276, 308-309, 349-351.

Nikolai Shvernik to investigate issues related to “rehabilitation.” Pospelov was chair. On February 9 this commission reported to the Presidium on “reasons for the mass repressions against members and candidates of the Central Committee elected at the Seventeenth Party Congress.” Almost certainly the commission relied in part on the evidence gathered earlier by Lev Shaumian. Using documents that were top secret at the time, the commission reported that 1.5 million persons were arrested and 681,692 executed in 1937-1938. The report stated that of 139 members and candidates elected to the Central Committee by the Seventeenth Party Congress, 98 were arrested and shot – numbers Khrushchev used in his “Secret Speech” weeks later. It described the methods by which cases were fabricated against high-ranking party members in 1937 and after. It also identified as key to the Terror’s development Kirov’s murder and the subsequent Law of December 1 setting up special tribunals (the *troiki*). There was no discussion of the possibility that Stalin had deliberately organized the assassination himself.²⁶

THE “MOLOTOV COMMISSION”

On February 25, 1956, at the conclusion of the Twentieth Party Congress, Khrushchev gave his “Secret Speech,” denouncing Stalin’s “cult of personality,” his arrests and executions of party members after 1934, and his failure to prepare for the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. Khrushchev also acknowledged Stalin’s supposed accomplishments (such as industrialization of the USSR). He did not suggest that there were systemic problems other than “the cult of personality,” nor did he question the forced collectivization of agriculture, or the expulsion of Trotskyites, “Rightists,” and other oppositionists from the party.

Following up on the February 9 Pospelov report and Mikoian’s earlier question to Lev Shaumian, Khrushchev addressed the question of the mass annihilation of Central Committee members after the Seventeenth Party Congress. He attributed the extermination to Stalin’s unchecked power, but did not offer more specifics. Immediately following this part of the speech, he noted that “mass repressions and gross violations of socialist legality” began after Kirov’s murder. With regard to the assassination itself, he said:

One has to note that the circumstances connected with the murder of Comrade Kirov are to this day befogged with much that is incomprehensible and mysterious, and demand careful investigation. There is reason to believe that someone among those charged with guarding Comrade Kirov aided the murderer Nikolaev. One and one half months before the murder of Kirov Nikolaev was arrested for suspicious behavior, but was released and not even searched. The fact that the Chekist attached to Kirov ended up dead in an auto “accident” on December 2, 1934 while being driven to interrogation is

26 *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 1, pp. 317-348.

extremely suspicious. After the murder of Kirov the leading officers of the Leningrad NKVD were removed from their posts and given very light punishments, but in 1937 were shot. It is conceivable that they were shot in order to clean up the traces of the organizers of Kirov's murder.²⁷

Khrushchev's speech reveals him to be a "master of dosing" almost as great as Stalin himself. He did not directly state that Stalin or other party leaders were involved in preparing Kirov's murder. But by placing his suggestion that there had been a conspiracy to kill the Leningrad party leader immediately after his discussion of the destruction of the CC membership after 1934 and his note that the orgy of killing followed Kirov's death, he signaled his readiness to accept a specific narrative of the Terror. This would be one in which Stalin himself and/or his closest assistants at the time (Molotov, Kaganovich) had plotted the killing to justify the subsequent extermination of party cadres. This narrative would make sense of the Terror, and it would also bring Khrushchev's major rivals for power – Molotov, Kaganovich, and Malenkov – crashing down. It would exonerate "true" Bolshevism of responsibility for the Terror, laying it all at the feet of Stalin and his closest lieutenants in 1934-1938. It would also exonerate junior members of the Bolshevik leadership who supported Khrushchev in 1956 – they "had no idea" about the mass repressions in the 1930s.

Many party officials, ambitious or afraid, or both, responded with alacrity to Khrushchev's signal. This response followed the Stalinist pattern, in which subordinates rushed to carry out wishes the leader expressed only in hints and insinuations. Pospelov was one such subordinate.

As part of his work on the commission on Stalinist repressions created on Dec. 31, 1955, Pospelov prepared a report on Kirov's murder, which he presented to the Presidium on April 23, 1956. This report is important for the light it sheds both on the rumors about the assassination reported by Shatunovskaia in her 1955 letter and the construction of an alternative history of the murder. Pospelov and his colleagues looked into Shatunovskaia's letter, summoning the doctor and nurse she cited to Moscow for interviews. Dr. Kirchakov indicated he *had not* heard the story he told Shatunovskaia about Nikolaev's interview with Stalin directly from former Leningrad NKVD chief Medved, but from an ex-NKVD officer, Olskii. The nurse Trunina simply averred that, like Shatunovskaia, she had heard the story from Kirchakov.²⁸

In short, the story that Nikolaev denounced the Leningrad NKVD officers in his interview with Stalin was not third-hand, but *fourth-hand* (Medved to Olskii to Kirchakov to Shatunovskaia) when Shatunovskaia put it to paper. Pospelov concluded that Kirchakov's tale could not be relied upon.

In discounting Kirchakov's story, Pospelov was not covering for Stalin. In the remainder of his report, he constructed a case that Stalin *did* order

27 Khrushchev, *Vospominaniia*, vol. 2, pp. 758-759.

28 "Zapiska P.N. Pospelova ob ubiistve Kirova," *Svobodnaia mysl'* 8 (1992), pp. 64-71.

Kirov's murder. He did so by using materials from 1937-1938 investigations of Iagoda, Enukidze, Zaporozhets, and the Leningrad NKVD officers accused of murdering Borisov. In other words, in order to implicate Stalin, he chose to rely on "evidence" that was extracted under torture in the process of fabricating a case against arrested NKVD chief Iagoda. The confessions obtained by torture for the great Stalinist show trials were of course untrustworthy, and many of those who confessed (including Iagoda) retracted their confessions in court. Pospelov's version of the crime duplicated the March 1938 show trial version, except that Stalin replaced the "Right-Trotskyite Center" as the source of the order to kill Kirov.²⁹

A very likely interpretation of Pospelov's report is this. The author, an old Stalinist (like everyone at the top of party in the 1950s), was producing what he knew "the boss" (once Stalin, now Khrushchev) wanted. Regarding Shatunovskaia's fourth-hand tale as too far-fetched even for his purposes, he cherry-picked the 1937-1938 confessions, which at least were on paper and usually signed by their supposed authors, to produce a coherent story of how Stalin had Kirov killed. He generated the narrative that Khrushchev demanded. Now it was up to Khrushchev how, when, and in what forum to use that story-line.

Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" on de-Stalinization set off a furor that resembled a traditional Bolshevik "self-criticism" campaign. At upper levels of the party potential targets of the campaign (i.e. Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich) publicly applauded but strove to protect themselves by covert obstructionism and delaying tactics. Inside the CC executive apparatus officials like Pospelov worked to produce texts that Khrushchev might need in pursuit of the campaign. Professional elites and lower-ranking party members victimized by Stalin spoke out against him. At public meetings a few even dared to discuss the responsibility of the entire party leadership for the reign of fear. At some workplaces employees tore down or defaced portraits of Stalin. Meanwhile Stalin's defenders were at least as vociferous. In Georgia the republic leaders imposed martial law after pro-Stalin riots on the anniversary of the dictator's death. Soviet security forces killed twenty people in the suppression of the riots.³⁰

An integral part of any "self-criticism" campaign was letters of denunciation "from below." After party meetings in Leningrad explaining Khrushchev's speech, former police and NKVD officers began sending letters to the province party committee concerning the Kirov murder. One letter, from V.M. Iakushev, caught the attention of Frol Kozlov, Leningrad party chief and Khrushchev ally. In late March or early April, Kozlov wrote to Khrushchev that "From

29 "Zapiska P.N. Pospelova," pp. 66-71.

30 On the disorders in local party and professional organizations following the "Secret Speech," see *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, pp. 21-65.

Iakushev's evidence it is clear that Borisov's murder was accomplished according to a plan worked out beforehand."

V.M. Iakushev was in fact a key NKVD investigator in the 1937 construction of bogus charges of treason and murder against Genrikh Iagoda and former leaders of the "Right Deviation" Bukharin and Rykov. Evidence gathered by Iakushev and others was the basis for the March 1938 show trial of these men. In 1937 Iakushev had tortured the driver of the truck in which Borisov died, Kuzin, and the two escorting NKVD officers, Vinogradov and Malyi, until all finally confessed to killing Kirov's guard. In the narrative concocted by Iakushev and his fellow "investigators," Zaporozhets feared that Borisov would reveal Iagoda's supposed conspiracy to murder Kirov. So he ordered Borisov killed. A plan was hatched to do away with him under the guise of a car "accident." When Kuzin was driving Borisov to Leningrad party headquarters for interrogation by Stalin the day after Kirov's killing, Malyi had grabbed the steering wheel and run the truck off the street against a wall. Simultaneously, Vinogradov, riding in the back of the truck with Borisov, smashed the latter's head with a bludgeon, killing him.³¹

The story of Borisov's murder developed for the show trial of Iagoda et al, is highly unreliable. Evidence from the 1934-1935 investigation and other sources contradicts the 1937-1938 narrative Iakushev presented on almost every point. Moreover, in 1937 Kuzin, Malyi, and Vinogradov all denied any wrongdoing in Borisov's death through several weeks of torture (apparently ten days in Kuzin's case). And finally, Malyi and Vinogradov recanted their confessions at their court hearing on September 2, 1937.³²

Iakushev was a perpetrator, a torturer, and a collaborator in Stalin's fabrication of false criminal cases. His 1956 letter seems to have been a preemptive strike – by providing his version of events to party leaders, he not only insured himself against prosecution, but also curried favor with them. Kozlov, Khrushchev's associate, was buying what Iakushev had to sell. In his letter to Khrushchev, Kozlov also accepted without question other dubious evidence, such as accounts of plots against Kirov's life given by M.A. Volkova, a psychologically ill compulsive denouncer Stalin had used in the aftermath of the Kirov murder to arrest dozens of Leningraders on bogus charges of terrorist plots. Based on such dubious claims, Kozlov concluded "These facts demonstrate, obviously, that several different plans for killing Kirov were worked out in the organs of the MVD (i.e. NKVD)."³³

On April 13, 1956 the Presidium created a commission to investigate "materials of the open trials of the cases of Bukharin, Rykov, Zinoviev, Tukhachevskii, and others." This commission would look into the Kirov case as well, but it is important to note that its mandate was much broader – in effect,

31 *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, pp. 36-38.

32 Kirilina, *Neizvestnyi Kirov*, pp. 344-349.

33 *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, p. 38.

to explain that part of the Terror directed against the upper levels of the Communist Party. At first glance, the composition of the commission was strange. Of nine members, three, Molotov, Kaganovich, and Voroshilov, had been involved at the highest level in orchestrating the Terror, and thus were themselves potential targets of investigation. They were, however, outnumbered by the six members of the commission from the junior ranks of the CC leadership, all of whom supported Khrushchev during this period – Mikhail Suslov, Ekaterina Furtseva, Shvernik, Aristov, Pospelov, and Rudenko. Shvernik, a Khrushchev supporter during the Thaw, had just been appointed chairman of the Party Control Commission on which Shatunovskaia served.³⁴

Putting Molotov, Kaganovich, and Voroshilov on the commission may have been a sop to them and to others nervous about where the party's investigation of the Terror might lead. It may also have been an exercise in harassment and disciplinary power by Khrushchev. At the commission sessions Molotov and the others would be subject to insinuations, badgering, and generally uncomfortable discussions. Finally, Khrushchev may have considered that getting the signatures of the veteran Stalinists would be the final validation of commission findings. Given the party tradition of unanimous approval of such reports, he may have hoped that all three could ultimately be forced into signing whatever report the commission issued, and, perhaps, incriminating themselves.³⁵

THE COMMISSION INVESTIGATES

On April 16 the Molotov commission met for the first time. All members were present except for Rudenko, the head of the prosecutor's office, who was represented by one of his deputies, Baranov. Also present was Serov. The commission began its work with a consideration of the Kirov assassination, ordering Serov and Baranov to prepare reports on KGB and prosecutorial documents related to the case. Members resolved to meet again in one week.³⁶

In response to the commission's request, Serov and Baranov forwarded on April 20 a "Report on Investigative Materials in the Case of the Villainous Murder of S.M. Kirov." Attached to the report were copies of selected materials from the case and a note that commission members could examine all documents related to the murder at KGB headquarters.³⁷ This report, and the minutes of the commission meeting of April 23 that discussed it, reveal two radically different agendas at work. On the one hand, the April 23 commis-

34 See A.I. Melchin, *Nikolai Shvernik: Biograficheskii ocherk* (Moskva: Politizdat, 1977), pp. 208, 216. Shvernik was appointed on February 27, 1956, at the plenum of the Central Committee that immediately followed the XXth Party Congress.

35 *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, p. 70.

36 RGANI, f. 6, op. 13, d. 43, l. 1.

37 Email to author from M.Iu. Prozumenshchikov, deputy director of RGANI, Sept. 5, 2005.

sion meeting resolved, probably at the prompting of Molotov and his allies, that Nikolaev's murder was a "political" act, and dismissed questions about the assassin's psychological state. Commission members asked Baranov, the KGB, and the Party Control Commission (Shvern timer) to answer a series of questions related to the official 1934-1935 version of the crime. These questions boiled down to: was Nikolaev a Zinovievite? What were his ties to Zinovievite groups? What activities in Leningrad were the Zinovievites up to before the murder? Wasn't the guard Borisov murdered? These questions are attributable to the desire of Molotov and his allies to defend at least the 1934-1935 version of the crime (that Zinoviev supporters in Leningrad and Moscow were responsible). In this version of events, Nikolaev was a Zinovievite terrorist, and hence his trial, the trials of Kamenev and Zinoviev, and probably also the later show trials of 1937-1938 were all justified.³⁸

On the other hand the April 23 session also requested that the USSR prosecutor "present to the commission materials on the validity and legality of the preliminary investigation, inquest, and trial" of the accused in the first trial of the Kirov case. Apparently some members of the commission did not want to accept the December 1934 court findings that Zinovievites had plotted the murder. And reports produced in late April by the KGB and the prosecutor's office took precisely this direction. Soon after April 23 Serov sent the commission a KGB report answering their inquiries. This memorandum presented Nikolaev as a lone gunman and argued that the NKVD fabricated criminal cases against the Zinovievites. It used citations from interrogations and the stenogram of the December 1934 trial of the "Leningrad Center" (i.e. the assassin Nikolaev and his thirteen supposed Zinovievite "co-conspirators") to argue that no such "Center" had ever existed. It demonstrated that the trial had violated standard Soviet rules for criminal trials. The authors also analyzed the changing testimony of the witnesses in the death of the guard Borisov, contending that the 1937-1938 "confessions" implicating NKVD officers in murdering him were bogus. Thus Serov provided support for the line that "the Terror was not justified," presumably the position taken by at least some of the other Khrushchev supporters on the commission.³⁹

The late April 1953 KGB report ended with an important coda covering the trial of Leningrad NKVD officials for negligence in the Kirov case in January 1935. This coda implied that there had been a conspiracy to assassinate Kirov, not among Zinovievite oppositionists, but within the Leningrad NKVD. It did so by emphasizing the failure of the Leningrad NKVD to protect Kirov, the lack of written instructions for Kirov's guard, the fact that the Leningrad NKVD had detained and released Nikolaev once before the murder, and the "soft" punishment meted out to Medved and his subordinates in 1935. The report also cited testimony taken by the KGB from former Leningrad NKVD

38 RGANI, f. 6, op. 13, d. 43, l. 2.

39 RGANI, f. 6, op. 13, d. 1, ll. 10-53.

officer P.M. Lobov. Lobov had claimed in April 1956 that while working at the Kolyma labor camp (sometime in 1935-1937) Zaporozhets had told him about a conversation between Stalin and NKVD chief Iagoda in early 1935. Supposedly Stalin had told Iagoda to take it easy on the Leningrad NKVD officers charged with negligence in the Kirov case, and to restore them to regular duties after a decent interval of time.⁴⁰

This testimony deserves special attention. Lobov, who had been Zaporozhets' deputy in Leningrad, was clearly hinting that Stalin had let the Leningrad NKVD off lightly for a reason – perhaps their negligence had not been unwelcome. This opened a possible line of inquiry that would point from the Leningrad NKVD to Stalin.

While Lobov's testimony seems dramatic, there are serious problems with it. First, his story about Stalin was fourth-hand by the time it was committed to paper in 1956 – Iagoda had supposedly told it to Zaporozhets who told it to Lobov, who told it to the KGB in 1956. Second, his 1956 deposition was probably tainted by earlier testimony against fellow Leningrad NKVD officers during the Great Terror. Lobov may have testified in 1937-1938 that *Iagoda* had ordered soft treatment of the Leningrad NKVD officers, because they had helped in the supposed anti-Soviet/anti-Stalin plot to kill Kirov. And in 1956 he may have decided to confirm his 1937 testimony, regardless of its truth or falsity, and with important change – having Stalin rather than Iagoda issue the orders for soft treatment. Whatever the case, in the years after 1956 Lobov would repeatedly enlarge upon his testimony until Zaporozhets at Kolyma was telling him the whole story of a putative Stalin-Iagoda-Zaporozhets plot to kill Kirov – again, almost precisely the storyline of the 1938 show trial of Iagoda and the leaders of the "Right-Trotskyite Bloc." It is also worth noting that in 1939 Lobov had won a reduction in his sentence by killing former oppositionist G. Sokol'nikov in jail on Beria's orders. Lobov was a murderer and a teller of tall tales.

Serov's report of late April 1956, then, presented one complete line of argument, against Molotov's claims that there had been a real Zinovievite conspiracy to murder Kirov. It also hinted at a second line of argument, that Stalin himself had ordered the assassination. The KGB only insinuated this, offering it up for possible future development. As far as we know, this charge would not be made explicit, even within the secret confines of the Central Committee, until the winter of 1960-1961.

A second response to the Molotov commission's queries of April 23 came from the USSR prosecutor's office. This was a report on the "materials on the validity and legality of the preliminary investigation, inquest, and trial in the case of the murder of S.M. Kirov." The prosecutor's memorandum repeated the contents of the two KGB reports already analyzed, albeit with some different data. The authors contended forcefully that Nikolaev was a lone gunman,

40 Ibid., II. 47-52.

psychologically disturbed, who had no conspiratorial connections to any of the other accused in the trial of the Leningrad Center. They argued that the trial of Nikolaev and his putative co-conspirators was an obvious fabrication that was “in direct violation” of Soviet law. In short, the prosecutor’s office took a strongly anti-Molotov position. Unlike the KGB reports, this memorandum did not discuss Borisov’s death or the issue of Leningrad NKVD negligence in organizing Kirov’s guard.⁴¹

The April 1953 reports by the KGB and USSR prosecutor’s office are indispensable for any evaluation of evidence in the Kirov case. Many of the documents presently available in the case (apart from hearsay, such as that reported by Alexander Orlov) were first released to the Molotov commission as attachments to these reports. The reports themselves indicate the position that the KGB leadership (Serov) and the USSR prosecutor (Rudenko) were taking with regard to the commission’s investigation, and thus they help us to gauge possible biases in the documents released. Would Serov, for example, have concealed evidence against Stalin or evidence against Leningrad NKVD officers in April 1956? Given the facts presented above, this seems very unlikely. KGB reports in April undermined Molotov’s claims that there was a larger oppositionist conspiracy against Stalin, and provided some support for arguments that Stalin himself had ordered the murder. In addition it is clear that Serov was Khrushchev’s man throughout this period. There was no reason for him not to be. Khrushchev controlled the situation in the spring of 1956. And he had made it clear both in the Secret Speech and in Presidium meetings that he was interested in “solving” the Kirov murder, and that the solution might implicate Stalin or his closest lieutenants at the time in the murder.

In spite of the KGB and prosecutor’s reports, Molotov, famous for his stubbornness, continued to defend the validity of the Stalinist version of Kirov’s murder.⁴² At a May 9, 1956 meeting the Molotov commission members failed to reach a consensus interpretation of the assassination and trial of the “Leningrad Center” that followed. Therefore, they resolved to lay aside consideration of the case for the moment and move on to investigate later trials. The commission would return to the Kirov affair at a later date.⁴³

In the meantime reaction to the “Secret Speech” inside and outside the USSR led to doubts among some Central Committee leaders about further public revelations of Stalinist repression. In the USSR the pro-Stalin riots in Georgia and numerous reports of party members questioning the entire Soviet system at meetings caused uneasiness. Then the “Secret Speech” went public on the international scene, as the *New York Times* published the text on June 4,

41 RGANI, f. 6, op. 13, d. 1, ll. 153-194.

42 See the ex post facto comments on Molotov commission work by Aristov at the July 1957 plenum of the Central Committee in Kovaleva, Korotkov, *Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich*, p. 189.

43 RGANI, f. 6, op. 13, d. 43, l. 3.

1956. In late June thousands of strikers in the Polish city of Poznan demanded "Bread and Freedom," while in Hungary participants in a youth forum established by the party leadership turned on the Communist leader, Matyas Rakosi. In June the Italian journal *Nuovi Argumenti* published an interview with Italian Communist leader Palmiro Togliati in which the latter suggested that under Stalin the Soviet Union had undergone "a bureaucratic degeneration" (this was Trotsky's old formula about Stalinism). In response the Central Committee Presidium tasked Pospelov with drafting a resolution on the "Secret Speech." The draft, with minor changes, was approved by the Presidium on June 30, 1956 under the title "On Overcoming the Cult of Personality and its Consequences."⁴⁴

Soviet reformers of the time and many Western historians came to view the June 30, 1956 Presidium resolution as a fundamental setback to, or even a reversal of de-Stalinization. Such claims go too far. Work continued on the rehabilitation of party members repressed in the Terror, on restoring the rights of deported peoples and former POWs, and on compensating released camp survivors for property confiscated at the time of their arrest or sentencing.⁴⁵ The resolution was an attempt to effect a fine balance, not a course reversal. It reaffirmed that Stalin had made great mistakes and committed many crimes, but that he was a genuine fighter for socialism. Flaws in his personality, noted by Lenin, together with the pressures of fighting capitalist enemies without and their collaborators within, had been too much for Stalin, and the deplorable result was the cult of personality. The "cult of personality," the resolution stated, was "in contradiction to the nature of Soviet society (*stroï*)." It was an alien growth that needed to be removed. At the same time, the Soviet people "were justified in their pride that our Motherland was the first to build the road to socialism."⁴⁶

The June 30 resolution seems to have emboldened Molotov and his supporters on the investigative commission. Protocols of the seven meetings between May 10 and July 30, 1956, combined with other evidence, suggest an escalating struggle between the Molotov group and the younger Khrushchev backers. In this period the commission examined documents of the major trials of 1935-1938 provided by Serov and Rudenko. On May 30, members were unprepared to deliver a scheduled written report to the Presidium on its findings, and resolved instead to present an oral summary. On June 1, the Presidium agreed to postpone the report. Questions put by the commission to Serov on July 25 suggest that Molotov was pushing hard his view that the defendants in the trials were guilty of at least some of the charges. The commission asked Serov to provide information on meetings of the accused with Trotskyites abroad, on Bukharin's possible connections with the old Socialist

44 See Taubman, *Khrushchev*, pp. 283-294, *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, pp. 128, 132-148.

45 *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, pp. 162-163, 172, 181-183, 172-176.

46 *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, p. 146.

Revolutionary Party, and on Nikolaev's connections with foreign consuls in Leningrad. On July 30 the commission resolved to return to discussion of the Kirov murder, requesting "detailed conclusions" on the matter from Rudenko and Serov before breaking for the summer holidays.⁴⁷

Khrushchev's point-man on the commission, Aristov, continued to work with Serov on the Kirov murder. On July 18, 1956 Serov sent a memorandum to Aristov headed "on the results of investigation of M.N. Volkova's letter on the murder of S.M. Kirov." Volkova was a compulsive denouncer Stalin pulled out of a mental hospital on December 2, 1934 and used to purge Leningrad of supposed anti-terrorist plotters. In May 1956 she sent a denunciation to the CC, claiming that she had known Nikolaev personally, that he had been a member of a counterrevolutionary organization dedicated to assassinating Kirov, Molotov, and Voroshilov, and that some participants in the conspiracy were still alive and well in Leningrad. To his memo on this denunciation Serov attached a KGB report that destroyed Volkova's credibility. According to the report, Volkova had been an agent of the security organs from 1931. She had a history of denouncing friends and acquaintances as counterrevolutionary plotters both before and after Kirov's murder. From 1948-1955 the Leningrad security organs had received 90 letters of denunciation from Volkova and generated eleven volumes of material investigating them. She had denounced her boyfriend when he broke up with her, her daughter, and many neighbors and acquaintances, all of capital crimes.⁴⁸

Serov concluded that Volkova was wholly unreliable.

Given that Serov's letter was addressed to Aristov, it seems that the latter had probably asked for a KGB evaluation of Volkova's denunciation. The denunciation itself could have been used by Molotov or his antagonists on the Molotov commission. It suggested a wide-ranging conspiracy to murder Kirov, true, but one directed against the Stalinist leadership as a whole (which would fit the 1938 show trial version of events). The KGB debunked the denunciation completely. It is worth noting that a later commission, on which Shatunovskaia played a decisive role, would return to Volkova's evidence in an effort to find evidence implicating Stalin in the murder.

Late in the summer, the KGB produced yet another report on the Kirov murder, in response to the Molotov commission's July 30 demand for "detailed conclusions." This memorandum squarely opposed the efforts of Molotov and his allies to suggest that there had been a real Zinovievite conspiracy to kill Kirov. The authors marshaled a great deal of evidence from the 1934-1935 investigations to argue that Nikolaev was a lone gunman and Borisov had died in an auto accident. They also went over testimony about the Kirov murder in the later show trials, demonstrating that the defendants, including Iagoda, were almost certainly innocent of any conspiracy.

47 RGANI, f. 6, op. 13, d. 43, ll. 4-10. For Presidium decision postponing Molotov commission report, see *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, p. 114.

48 *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, pp. 163-167.

In this report Serov omitted any evidence that might point to a conspiracy by Stalin, Iagoda, and/or local NKVD officials to kill Kirov. Yet KGB investigators continued to gather such evidence, even if it was dubious. On July 20, Lobov, Zaporozhets' former deputy discussed above, enlarged on his April testimony. Not only had Zaporozhets told him about Stalin's order to let Leningrad NKVD officers off easily, Lobov said, he had also told him that the Leningrad NKVD had detained Nikolaev multiple times,⁴⁹ and that Iagoda, through Zaporozhets, had ordered Nikolaev's release. Here again, Lobov's testimony followed the story-line of the March 1938 show trial on the purported conspiracy to murder Kirov.⁵⁰

Why did Serov leave out material suggesting an upper-level conspiracy to murder Kirov? Perhaps he and his staff believed that available material was false (as they believed with Volkova's letter). Perhaps also they were responding to the new doubts about public denunciation of Stalin. Almost certainly they chose to focus their memorandum on refuting Molotov's contention that there had really been some kind of an oppositionist plot to assassinate Kirov.

The Molotov commission did not meet again until November 19, 1956, perhaps because the discussions had reached an impasse, perhaps because the Soviet leaders were occupied with summer holidays, the Suez war in Egypt, and revolution in Hungary. But when it did meet, members moved quickly to produce a report to the Presidium. After discussion of new memoranda on the Kirov murder from Serov and Rudenko, the commission charged Rudenko with preparing a draft report to the Presidium. On December 4 the commission approved Rudenko's draft, recommending minor changes.⁵¹

The commission's December 1956 conclusions were an incoherent and contradictory mess, but an overall victory for Molotov. The memorandum emphasized that because there were real enemies inside and outside the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s (Trotskyites, kulaks, Rightists, the Germans and Japanese) the repressions of the period were justified. Because Kirov had fought Zinovievites and Trotskyites in Leningrad, they hated him. The result was Nikolaev's shooting of Kirov. The report stated that Nikolaev had "sharply anti-Soviet attitudes" and strongly implied that he was a Zinovievite. Nikolaev knew personally some of the ex-Zinovievites who were tried with him.⁵² At the same time the memorandum admitted that there was no conclusive evidence of "criminal ties" between Nikolaev and the other accused in the

49 Evidence from the 1934-1935 investigation indicates that Nikolaev was detained by the NKVD just once before the murder, that no pistol was found on him, and that his briefcase (although not his person) was searched.

50 RGANI, f. 6, op. 13, d. 13, ll. 7-45.

51 RGANI, f. 6, op. 13, d. 43, ll. 11-12.

52 Only partly true, based on evidence from the 1934-1935 investigation and the transcript of the trial of the "Leningrad Center." Three of the defendants had never met Nikolaev before the trial, and a fourth may not have. See Kirilina, *Neizvestnyi Kirov*, pp. 284-294.

"Trial of the Leningrad Center." Indeed, the Leningrad Center as such probably never existed.⁵³

The commission found that the sentences in the 1935 trial of the "Moscow Center" supposedly headed by Zinoviev and Kamenev were justified. The Zinovievite leaders really did bear responsibility for encouraging terrorism by struggling against the party majority. On the other hand, there was no evidence that Zinoviev, Kamenev or their associates were directly involved in plotting Kirov's murder. Yet, there was no reason to review the convictions of the 1936-1938 show trials, because the principals in those trials had undermined the construction of socialism in the USSR. The implication was that while no specific crime could be hung on the necks of the ex-opposition leaders, they had still deserved execution for struggling against "the party."⁵⁴

Finally, the report conceded that Stalin's unlimited power had allowed him to undertake a full-scale attack on the party itself in the wake of Kirov's murder, aided by "careerists and provocateurs" in the NKVD.

The December 1956 report was a cut-and-paste job of mutually exclusive propositions, some from Serov's and Rudenko's reports, some harking back to the era of the show trials themselves. Khrushchev evidently was unhappy with it. Given his actions and statements before and afterwards, it seems quite likely that he had wanted a complete rejection of the show trial verdicts and some sort of indictment of Stalin. On December 14, 1956 the Presidium resolved to "take note of" the Molotov commission's report and order it back to work. The Presidium also put Serov on the commission (previously he had attended sessions only as a *rapporteur*, not as a member). Presumably this was because Khrushchev wanted to strengthen his influence on the deliberations.⁵⁵

In the following months relations deteriorated between Khrushchev and a number of other party leaders. Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, and Malenkov must all have feared the personal consequences of further public de-Stalinization. But others, including Bulganin and USSR Foreign Minister Shepilov, also came to view Khrushchev as out-of-control and dangerously power-hungry. De-Stalinization was not the only issue for this group. They were afraid of Khrushchev's accumulation of power, they were afraid of his control of the KGB through Serov, and they were appalled at some of his policy initiatives, most notably his January 1957 proposal to decentralize the management of industry. There was also a general perception that Khrushchev was a rash big-mouth, exacerbated by his boast in May 1957 that the Soviet Union would soon produce more meat and dairy products per capita than the United States.⁵⁶

⁵³ *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, pp. 204-207.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, pp. 207-208.

⁵⁶ Taubman, *Khrushchev*, pp. 300-306; Kovaleva, Korotkov, *Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich*, pp. 10-13; Shepilov, *Neprimknuvshii*, pp. 36-38, 387-396.

Although Khrushchev has been portrayed as unaware of the widespread dissatisfaction with his power,⁵⁷ there is some evidence that he was deliberately pushing affairs towards a confrontation. Shepilov and Petr Demichev, a Khrushchev assistant in 1957, both believed Khrushchev knew that the attempt to remove him was in the works. Shepilov asserted that Serov, who was eavesdropping on the other party leaders, must have told him.⁵⁸ Putting these claims together with Khrushchev's aggressive behavior towards Molotov, Malenkov, and Kaganovich in the spring of 1957, it appears quite plausible that the Soviet leader was pressing towards a final showdown with his rivals.⁵⁹

During this period of heightened tension the Molotov commission continued to produce reports that were unpalatable to Khrushchev. On April 8, 1957 the commission met for the first time after a four-month hiatus, with Serov now on board as a full member. Participants chose to define a narrow issue for investigation, namely the death of Kirov's guard Borisov. Serov and Rudenko were assigned to prepare a draft report to the Central Committee. On April 13 the commission discussed the draft, but apparently Aristov, Khrushchev ally and aggressive de-Stalinizer, was unhappy with it. The commission agreed to postpone presentation of a report to the Central Committee for ten days, while Aristov gathered new materials on Borisov's death. Unfortunately, we do not know what materials, if any, Aristov provided.⁶⁰

On April 23, after some discussion, commission members assigned Rudenko, Serov, and Pospelov to prepare by the end of the day another draft memorandum on Borisov. Apparently they were under pressure to present their report quickly to the Presidium. The final report was, like the December memorandum on the 1930s show trials, an awkward, inconclusive document. The authors wrote that "doubts" about Borisov's death were understandable – he was the only one seriously hurt in the truck accident, and his failure to maintain a close guard on Kirov led to the latter's death. But the 1937 testimony of the driver and guards who accompanied Borisov on December 2 was extracted under torture, and was therefore untrustworthy. Hence, there was no hard evidence of foul play. The commission stated that since events had occurred so long ago, there was no possibility of finally determining the truth, and therefore the inquiry should be closed. The report concluded that the com-

57 Taubman acknowledges claims that Khrushchev knew about the June 1957 overthrow attempt against him, but concludes, "The last thing (Khrushchev) let himself believe was that the power and glory he craved were about to be taken from him," Taubman, *Khrushchev*, pp. 316-317.

58 Ibid.; Shepilov, *Neprimknuvshii*, p. 393.

59 Further evidence for this proposition is Brezhnev's claim at the June 1957 plenum of the CC that the "anti-party group" made their coup attempt against Khrushchev in part because Party Control Commission chief Shvernik was presenting documents to the Presidium on the rehabilitation of Communist repressed at the orders of Molotov, Malenkov, and Kaganovich. Kovaleva, Korotkov, *Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich*, p. 245.

60 RGANI, f. 6. op. 13, d. 43, ll. 14-15.

mission stuck by its December conclusion that the “terrorist Nikolaev” had killed Kirov for political reasons, with the “connivance” of persons in charge of Kirov’s guard.⁶¹

Again, Molotov seems to have succeeded in placing key elements of his version of events into the document. Nikolaev *was* a “political terrorist” and he did have the help of Kirov’s guard – again, a repetition of fragments of the storyline from the March 1938 trial of Bukharin et al. Whereas Serov’s August 31, 1956 memorandum had concluded that Borisov’s death was an accident, the April 23, 1957 commission report asserted that no conclusion was possible. It is true that claims that the Leningrad NKVD officers connived in Kirov’s death and killed Borisov could be (and later were) fit into a storyline in which Stalin ordered Kirov’s assassination. However these were also key elements of the 1938 version of the murder incriminating the “Right-Trotskyite Bloc.” It is likely that Molotov supported their inclusion in the April 1957 report because he was struggling to maintain the validity of the show trials and the Stalinist version of the Kirov murder.

Khrushchev, however, was determined to expose the Molotov group’s ties to Stalinist terror. On the afternoon of April 25 the Presidium met to discuss the rehabilitation of Tukhachevskii, Iakir, and Uborevich, the generals executed for treason in 1937, as well as other cases. Khrushchev threw down the gauntlet to Molotov and company. During discussion of the rehabilitation of E.E. Rubinchik, a former factory director convicted for sabotaging the design of an amphibious tank, Khrushchev stated sarcastically that “my friend Georgii Malenkov played an unseemly role in this affair.” When the Presidium considered the Tukhachevskii rehabilitation, Khrushchev challenged, “let the old members of the Politburo tell us how they decided the question of bringing Iakir to trial, how this first step was prepared.” Marshal Zhukov seconded Khrushchev with “we’ve got to get to the bottom of this.” According to Brezhnev’s account two months later, at the June 1957 CC plenum, Khrushchev asked at this meeting, “What are we going to do with those guilty of these executions? Will we return to this issue, or will we just continue to keep our mouths shut about them...”⁶²

DEFEAT OF MOLOTOV AND THE “ANTI-PARTY GROUP”

During May Rudenko and Serov continued to press rehabilitation in a direction that the old Politburo cohort could not have liked. On May 18, 1957 the two recommended the rehabilitation of Akmal Ikramov, tried and convicted together with Bukharin in the March 1938 trial of the “Right-Trotskyite Bloc.” Ikramov was the first rehabilitee from among those convicted in the open show

61 *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, pp. 269-270.

62 *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, pp. 270-271. For Brezhnev quote, see Kovaleva, Korotkov, *Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich*, pp. 245-246.

trials of the Terror. In their memorandum, Serov and Rudenko debunked the evidence presented against Ikramov, including his own “confessions.” The rehabilitations moved one step closer to the leaders of the Right themselves, Bukharin and Rykov, and to a complete rejection of the show trials.⁶³

On June 18, 1957 tensions between Khrushchev and the Molotov group erupted. With the support of seven of eleven full members of the Presidium, the old Stalin guard attempted to fire Khrushchev from the post of First Secretary of the Central Committee. For four days Presidium members locked in intense debate, with the majority of full members savaging Khrushchev for arrogance, incompetence, and construction of his own cult of personality. A number of Khrushchev’s rivals complained that Serov was spying on them, and there was apparently a proposal to remove Serov as KGB chief. Kaganovich argued that Khrushchev’s supposed sympathies with the Trotskyites were motivating his efforts to review the great show trials of the Terror.

The Khrushchev faction fought back. Zhukov and Shvernik denounced Molotov, Kaganovich, and Malenkov’s prominent roles in the Terror, with Zhukov apparently reading aloud from archival documents. Khrushchev rallied candidate members of the Presidium and a number of CC secretaries to his side. Behind the scenes Serov and Zhukov flew dozens of Central Committee members to Moscow on military transport aircraft. With the military, the KGB, and the majority of the party elite below Presidium level on his side, Khrushchev forced his opponents to agree to a full session of the Central Committee, which began on June 22.⁶⁴

Khrushchev was in undisputed control of the CC plenum that followed, which was devoted to denunciation of the “anti-party group” of Molotov, Malenkov, and Kaganovich. These three, together with Shepilov, were expelled from their leadership posts and from the Central Committee. Three other full Presidium members, Pervukhin, Saburov, and Bulganin, “confessed” their errors early in the plenum and got off with demotions for the time in being. Khrushchev let Voroshilov off the hook, more a gesture of contempt than anything else.⁶⁵

The June 1957 CC plenum was above all about the history of the Stalin era. With Khrushchev victorious, dozens of Central Committee members jostled to denounce Molotov, Malenkov, and Kaganovich for participating in the annihilation of party higher-ups under Stalin. Furtseva referred to their “monstrous crimes,” Brezhnev denounced their “fanatical approach to cadres,” and Kozlov criticized Malenkov’s leading role in the execution of Leningrad leader Kuznetsov in 1949.⁶⁶ Speakers cited documents from the KGB archives on the

63 *Reabilitatsiia*, vol. 2, pp. 271-272.

64 Taubman, *Khrushchev*, pp. 317-320; Kovaleva, Korotkov, *Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich*, pp. 14-15, 183; Shepilov, *Nepriimkuvshii*, pp. 393-396.

65 Kovaleva, Korotkov, *Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich*, p. 567.

66 *Ibid.*, pp. 199-201, 205, 246, 250, 258.

scale of repressions, with Khrushchev himself giving total numbers for the repressed in the Terror that had previously only been revealed at Presidium meetings – 1.5 million arrested, 681,692 shot in 1937-1938.⁶⁷ Serov had a major part in the denunciation of Kaganovich, describing his leadership of mass purges in Ukraine and his marginal note of “kudos” (*privetstvuiiu*) on an arrest list.⁶⁸ Rudenko savaged Malenkov and Kaganovich for obstructing the investigations into the Stalin era, and Molotov for justifying the murder of party cadres.⁶⁹

Aristov in particular shed light on the history of the Molotov commission, albeit from the point of view of the Khrushchevites. According to him, “we sat on that commission endlessly. The debates were extremely harsh.” Voroshilov “just got outraged,” while Kaganovich and Molotov said the trials during the Terror were “correct,” “in the interests of the party,” and “the right thing to do.” Serov and Rudenko provided documents, Aristov said, that ultimately forced Molotov and Kaganovich to recognize “maybe half” of the crimes committed. Kaganovich confessed “there were excesses,” while Molotov stated, “there were good political reasons for all of that.” Because of Serov and Rudenko’s services in providing documents on the crimes of the Stalinist leadership, Aristov said, the anti-party group had aimed to fire Serov after Khrushchev’s removal.⁷⁰

The real bomb-thrower was V.N. Malin, head of the Central Committee General Affairs Department (*obshchii otdel*) and one-time Leningrad official who had witnessed Kuznetsov’s trial in 1949. Malin asserted that the mass executions of the later 1930s were not just Stalin’s doing. “No, Kaganovich and Molotov – they’re guilty (too). I’ll go further – Kirov’s ghost hangs over Molotov. Let him answer why Medved was destroyed, why Enukidze was destroyed... The case of Kirov’s assassination is a case that has not yet been deeply examined. Based on the documentary materials we have, I’m prepared to say that.”⁷¹

In his concluding speech to the plenum, Khrushchev disavowed Malin’s assertions, but somewhat in the manner of a Mafia boss ruing the excessive enthusiasm of his enforcers. “I respect (Malin), but he has his character, yesterday you saw that character.” Malin may have taken things too far, Khrushchev indicated, but he was also giving an implied threat about what accusations could be deployed against the “anti-party group.” Indeed, later in the same speech, Khrushchev returned to the Kirov murder, and while he did not mention Molotov’s name, he did indicate that further investigation was necessary.

67 Ibid., p. 479.

68 Ibid., pp. 176, 247.

69 Ibid., pp. 417-419.

70 Ibid., pp. 188-197.

71 Ibid., p. 429.

I still can't make sense of all the circumstances of Kirov's murder... It's not clear why, after Kirov's death, it was necessary to kill Borisov when Stalin arrived in Leningrad and Borisov – Kirov's guard – was being driven to an interrogation. They killed Borisov and said that he died as the result of an auto crash... Who needed this? It's clear that this was necessary to cover the traces (of the plot to murder Kirov). Even today I do not believe that Zinoviev had anything to do with this. We had a battle of ideas with Trotskii, Bukharin, and Zinoviev, and we smashed them. But after Kirov's murder hundreds of thousands of heads were laid on the execution block. Why was this necessary? Even today this is a mystery, and it would be a good thing to look into. But does Molotov get it? No. He trembles before this, he fears even hints about this question; Kaganovich is in the same situation.⁷²

If the KGB or other instances had documents that might connect Stalin or any of the "anti-party group" to Kirov's assassination, directly or indirectly, Khrushchev supporters at this plenum would have revealed them, or at least mentioned their existence. No one was "covering" for Stalin at this moment – the Khrushchevites revealed many of his most heinous crimes, as well as the collaboration of Molotov, Kaganovich, Malenkov, Beria, and others in mass murder. Malin's assertion that Kirov's ghost "hung over Molotov" has to be viewed as speculative hyperbole aimed at intimidating Molotov.

Khrushchev's words to the plenum on the Kirov murder are revealing. In order to suggest the involvement of Stalin and the Molotov group in the assassination, Khrushchev resorted to the 1937-1938 show trial version of events, and to testimony extracted under torture (that of the truck driver in Borisov's death). In doing so he omitted any reference to the 1934-1935 investigation results. Instead he presented as simple truth a version of Borisov's death that was unsubstantiated and dubious.

CONCLUSION

The storyline in which Stalin conspired to kill Kirov had great political utility for party reformers in the Khrushchev years. It could be used to indict Khrushchev's rivals Molotov, Kaganovich, and Malenkov for mass murder of party cadres. It could also be used to exonerate the rest of the party, and Leninism in general, for the Terror. Stalin and a few henchmen were responsible for "distorting" Leninism, and killing millions. In this vision Khrushchev, and even Stalin's supposed victim Kirov, represented the "genuine," "humanitarian" Leninism, the Leninism of the future. This was the direction in which some Khrushchev supporters, such as Mikoian, Aristov, and Shatunovskaia were pushing during the Thaw. Khrushchev himself, not surprisingly, was sympathetic to their efforts.

But there were obstacles to presenting the "Stalin killed Kirov" tale to the public as official party history. First, there was not good evidence for the

⁷² Ibid., p. 479.

story. Second, making it public might have unpredictable consequences. The experience of disorders inside and outside the USSR following the Twentieth Party Congress had given many party leaders pause. Although Khrushchev hinted again at the Twenty-Second Party Congress in October 1961 that Stalin might have organized the Kirov assassination, this version disappeared from the Soviet press after his fall. Not until late in the *perestroika* era did official Soviet publications pick up the story again.